

The Christian News-Letter

No. 250

Edited by
KATHLEEN BLISS

26th December, 1945

DEAR MEMBER,

If the efforts of our office staff and our printer are not rendered vain by the delays of the Christmas post, this News-Letter should reach members in this country in time for us to wish them a very happy Christmas.

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS OF PEACE

Drinking and feasting seem out of place in a world of starving people, but the cold stable and the straw-filled manger belong to the kind of world we live in, and so, too, do the happiness of reunited families, the homecomings and the gifts. It is not those who have looked at death and known the frustration of earthly hopes who find no meaning in Christmas: often it is they who best understand its secret. Bishop Berggrav of Norway, who led his Church in its powerful resistance to Nazism (see C.N-L. Nos. 189 and 200), was in this country for a short visit a few weeks ago.

"During the occupation," he said in conversation, "although the hardships were severe, you could look into the eyes of a stranger and know that you had a friend. Danger has now been removed and a feeling of depression has largely taken its place. When you find most of the world to which you were accustomed in ruins about your ears, the only thing to do is to begin again at the simple personal level, trying every day to set somebody on his feet and help him on his way. Never were the words of Jesus more to the point than they are to-day for Christians everywhere. 'Work while it is yet day, for the night cometh when no man can work.' We are living again in an apocalyptic age. But for Christians the overwhelming fact is not the atomic bomb or the possible disappearance of civilization, but that GOD IS, and the eternal values which are in Him can never be destroyed."

Perhaps, therefore, in the light of these words which come as a prophetic message out of the sufferings of Christ's Church, the best use to which we can put a Christmas News-Letter is to look around the world at some of the places where Christians are trying to "work while it is yet day," so that we can remember our fellow Christians in our Christmas prayers.

HOLLAND

We have from time to time given news of the Dutch Churches. Many of the leaders of the Dutch Reformed Church found themselves during imprisonment by the Nazis at close quarters with political leaders and other resisters, many of whom had had scant converse with the Church before this common calamity threw them together. The results of these contacts and of the leadership given by the Churches during the war has been a new-born conviction that the Church must preserve its new-found nearness to ordinary people. At a spacious country house at Driebergen in the province of Utrecht, the Church is in process of founding an institute to be known as "The Church and the World." There is to be a first-class sociological institute, and one of the best-known sociologists in the Netherlands has been appointed as its director. Theological students will come here for part of their training, and ministers for special courses, and law students from the University of Utrecht. The institute will stimulate and support the work already begun by various congregations among what they describe as "the lost groups of the population." The main work of the institute will, however, be the training of a *militia Christi*. Leaders for youth movements, social workers for local churches and factories, assistants specially trained for country districts and for working-class areas, teachers with special care for youth out of school, teachers for the new popular universities and various types of assistant ministers. This new venture, making a heavy financial demand on the resources of an impoverished Church, has grown directly from the war, and the Dutch themselves describe their new institute as "a centre of energy in the organic life of the Church in furtherance of the new life resuscitated by God's mercy in the Dutch Reformed Church."

FRANCE

We have had one or two requests for further news about a most interesting development in France—a new publication named *Dieu Vivant*. Brother George Every has sent us this note on it:—

"*Dieu Vivant* is a miscellany produced in Paris by a group who had engaged in a common investigation for more than four years before the first number appeared last April. They describe their enterprise as a 'dialogue' between separated Christians, in which others, Jews and unbelievers, are invited to join. The Christians meet one another on the basis of 'fidelity to the Bible as the irruption of the Word of God into the world,' 'an eschatological conception of Christianity,' and meditation on the communion of saints. The Roman Catholic members of the group are evidently influenced by the Eastern Orthodox in their idea of the Church, and by 'existential' philosophers and Protestant theologians in their ideas of the right relations between the Church and secular culture.

"The first two numbers of a hundred and sixty pages each, admirably produced and printed by 'Editions du Seuil,' include articles by Martin Buber, by Gabriel Marcel on Heidegger, and on Kirkegaard and Nietzsche by a Swiss Jesuit, Fr. Hans von Balthasar. Some theological classics are reproduced, and a wide range of books is reviewed. Theological and literary movements in England are commented upon.

"I think we may see in this movement a continuation, on a deeper intellectual level, of the 'personalist'¹ current which began before the war among French Catholics and socialists influenced by the philosophy of Berdyaev. On the political level 'Personalism' has been a parent of the *Mouvement Republicain Populaire*, whose successes have changed the pattern of French politics, with repercussions felt all over Europe. *Dieu Vivant* suggests to me that the intellectual consequences may be as important. There is nothing here to suggest that Roman Catholics are prepared to enter the ecumenical movement as it is at present, but much to suggest the possibility of another movement in some respects wider in scope."

Of a different type is a new popular Protestant journal now to be bought on most French bookstalls, called *Réforme*. It is a weekly journal with the general appearance of a British evening paper, and alongside popular articles of all types it puts Christian comment on current affairs. Behind the scenes is a live group of Protestant laymen, most of whom are associated with the new "Protestant Professional Associations," which grew up during the war to quicken the witness of Christian laymen within their professions. These professional associations are growing together into a considerable lay movement with purposes similar to those of the Christian Frontier Council.

All this activity is going on in a country where there is still acute physical suffering as the result of the war. Southern France in particular is desperately short of food and clothing.

We have had a request for the C.N.-L. from a hostel run by the International Student Service at Combloux in the Haute Savoie. Hundreds of students who have been in the Maquis are physically or nervously unfit for their work and are here being given rest and help to fit them to resume their work as students.

THE GERMAN CHURCH

A month ago the Bishop of Chichester was in Germany, attending the first Synod of the newly constituted German Confessional Church. The Bishop writes as follows:—

"There are three outstanding factors which influence the work of the Churches in Germany, as they influence the whole German

¹ 'Personalism' is the emphasis of persons rather than, individuals, and of the community rather than the State. Ed.

situation. The first is the stunning effect on the general population of the colossal devastation which the Allied bombing has brought upon the towns. Second is the battle of the winter against starvation, cold and disease. Third, there is the vast wave of women, children and men expelled in masses from the eastern parts of the former Germany. On the top of these three factors comes the question, 'What is the future going to bring forth?' In addition to systematic de-Nazification, and the elimination of nearly all former members of the Nazi Party from responsible leadership, what are the Allies going to do about Germany's ultimate place in Europe, and to encourage a new leadership? All these elements combine to present a formidable background for the work of the Catholic and Evangelical Churches.

"The Churches certainly face their tasks with courage. Their leaders know very well that there is a great spiritual void to be filled, and the churches are usually very well attended—so much so that a common question in Padres' Hours from British troops is, 'We are told that the Germans were anti-Christian; why are the churches so full?' At the same time the Churches' leaders know also that if the people are to hear the Gospel they must be physically fed. Catholics and Protestants are working together in relief activities, both in Berlin and in the provinces. I saw evidence of the way in which the Protestant pastors and laity are grappling with material needs. Probst Grueber, a member of the magistrates of Berlin, is indefatigable in his work for refugees and for everyone in need. It was an inspiration to see him working side by side with civic officials and men of all parties—Communist, Social Democrat, Liberal Democrat, Christian Democrat. It was fine also to see the Children's Reception Centre at Oldenburg, organized by the Protestant Church to receive and pass on to private homes in the country some of the 50,000 children evacuated from Berlin for the winter. One of the things on which the Protestant Church will have to lay great stress for the future is the integration of its life with the social life of the community. And along with this it is vital that the laity of the German Evangelical Church should be an active laity, like the laity of the Norwegian Church, with a full and responsible share in the whole action of the Church.

"The Church is terribly isolated from the fellowship of Churches abroad. There is a hunger for news, for personal contact, for books, for papers, for any information about what is going on, and what has been written, not only since 1939, but since 1933. And if the Evangelical Church is to play its full part in the Christian renewal of Germany, there is need of a continual contact with Churches abroad. This fact made the recent visits of delegations from the World Council of Churches and from the British Council of Churches of such great importance.

“The leadership of the Churches is in the hands of fine men : Bishop Wurm of the Protestant Church is a courageous, wise, statesmanlike President of the Council, and he has a fine body of colleagues : Niemöller, brave, untiring, modest, absolutely disinterested, a great spiritual force ; Hans Lilje, of Hanover ; Otto Dibelius, Bishop of Berlin ; Hans Asmussen—and many more, men with a glowing record of witness to God in resistance to Hitler. These men know that the de-Nazification of Germany can only come from within, and that the Christian Church is the greatest source of spiritual renewal. Therefore they may well be encouraged to take the initiative in this direction, and to help themselves. At the same time, they need all the sympathy and support we can give them, the assurance of our prayers, our practical aid and our understanding. They will also be helped a great deal by personal encouragement from the British soldiers and administrators in the British Zone, and by their forthcoming friendship. As Pierre Maury said at Stuttgart, after the Council had made its declaration of solidarity with the German nation alike in suffering and guilt, ‘We cannot take away from you your misery ; but we can see that Germany has a proper place in a new beginning for the world.’ And may I recommend, as giving a fine lead to Christians of all nations on the subject with which it deals, Karl Barth’s book *The Germans and Ourselves*,¹ ‘What the Germans need now,’ he says, ‘at the dark turning point of their way, is, quite simply, *friends*,’ and he explains in wise and noble words the character of this friendship.”

THE TRAGEDY OF EUROPE

We promised our readers that we would keep them informed of efforts to avert the gigantic tragedy which threatens Europe. U.N.R.R.A. is gradually extending the range of its activities, giving larger help and to more countries. It is buying up millions of pounds of supplies, including wheat and other foodstuffs. Countries such as Norway which have financial assets abroad have bought stocks. The vast reserves built up during the war in Canada and the United States are being poured out and cannot be replaced. They are insufficient to meet the need. A recent report from a thoroughly reliable source describes a terrible situation in Poland. The people of destroyed villages are living in disused trenches and holes in the ground covered with thatch. The fields are extensively mined ; there is scarcely an animal left and the only food is potatoes.

What about the Germans in the Ruhr or Berlin, shivering in their ruins on their 1,500 calories or less, their water often coming to them through pipes in the gutters which will freeze, often without any fuel but scraps of wood ? There is no U.N.R.R.A. for them ; they

¹ Nisbet. 2s. 6d.

come at the bottom of every list. People in this country, by and large, know hardly anything about these conditions. The one scare that is raised is the fear of disease. What will happen next spring? Tens of thousands of Germans, mostly children, will die. This will be news; there will be headlines in all the papers, the public will ask why nothing was done before it was too late. When overwhelming tragedy arrives nobody thinks about whether a child had Nazi parents, he is just a child. "Many civil affairs detachments," says another report which has reached us, "entered Germany with the full intention of 'taking hell out of the Germans.'" Some proceeded to do so, but when they came up against Germans as individuals, their attitude changed. Seeing their plight their hatred disappeared, and practically every Military Government Officer in the Ruhr is now doing his utmost to help the Germans through the coming winter. The further one gets from the spot, the harder the attitude becomes." This is not sloppy sentimentality; this is the reaction of decent men to human misery.

What can we do about it? It is quite clear that for reasons which are at present sound, no reduction of rations here can be contemplated. Schemes for voluntary surrender of points or food raise large administrative problems for the ministries concerned and even more intractable ones for voluntary bodies charged with collecting, and still more, distributing heterogeneous masses of foodstuffs. The Ministry of Food have, however, agreed to allow the voluntary societies forming the Council of British Societies for Relief Abroad to buy a quantity of foodstuffs of particular value to children, nursing and expectant mothers, sick people and similar special groups, to be distributed through their workers and other contacts abroad. An appeal will shortly be announced. Over and above this, we greatly hope that the Government will take *now* on the country's behalf such steps as it might be prepared to take in the spring as the result of overwhelming tragedy.

If we have entered into the meaning of Christmas, human history for us turns about that event, and we cannot believe that Europe can find life by turning from her Christian heritage. In fact we see the Churches in Europe as the chief remaining support in a disintegrating society; in faith we see them as the foundations of a new life. Food is urgent, but let us at Christmas remember Christ's Church and our duty to lend our hands to raise it up.¹

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

¹ Christian Reconstruction in Europe, 56 Bloomsbury Street, London, W.C. 1, is the official organ of the Churches in this country for supplying help of this kind.

CHRISTMAS HAS HAPPENED

By DANIEL JENKINS

It is very difficult for us to grasp the fact that Christmas has really happened. When we start to think of the meaning of the whole mysterious process of life in which we are set and our destiny within it, most of us naturally assume that we are free to pick and choose our data according to our own inclinations and make our way towards a working philosophy at our own pace and on our own terms. But here we are rudely confronted with a stubborn fact which compels our attention and demands that we make some sense of it. Christmas has happened. Someone who claims to be the meaning and the goal of existence, and who is no mere freak but the climax and fulfilment of a great movement stretching from Abraham in remotest antiquity to the present time, has been born in this real world of ours. He has lived and he has died and it is asserted that he has risen again and, whatever our attitude to him, his influence has radically changed the whole course of the world's history. Because this has happened in our world the burden has been thrust upon us of either accepting his account of himself or finding an adequate reason for rejecting it.

THE MODERN FAILURE TO ACCOUNT FOR CHRIST

Many attempts have been made to find such reasons. Within the sphere of theology itself, the most sustained effort has been made to produce an account of Jesus which makes him and the reverence in which men hold him intelligible without accepting the account which those who were nearest him gave of him, with all that that implies. Jesus Christ, it has been maintained, was leader not Lord, a great teacher and reformer of the type which the nineteenth century, or a great revolutionary of the type which the twentieth century, could readily understand and admire, a man like ourselves with an authority differing in degree and not in kind from that which men hold over one another. All the mystery and wonder which surround the Christian story are, therefore, no more than pleasing and rather wistful fancies woven round the birth of a great man by simple minds, and Christmas is no more than a peak in the high range of the story of man's spiritual evolution.

For me, as for many others in these days, it has become clear that this attempted explanation breaks down. It is impossible adequately to account for Jesus Christ unless we accept what the

prophets, evangelists, and apostles testify concerning him. We have been driven to the conclusion that, as a philosopher has recently said, orthodox theology is more inherently credible than a philosophical theism which remains non-committal about Christ.

This means that if Christmas has really happened, the whole of what Christ claimed for himself and what the Church claims for him must be true. There is no half-way house between faith and unbelief which can provide us with a permanent resting-place, as those who are the products of a Christian nurture they cannot either fully accept or altogether reject would still fondly believe. If a child is born to us this day in the city of David then he must be nothing less than a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. If Christmas has really happened, all the promises of God are yea and amen in Jesus Christ.

HAS IT HAPPENED ?

But has it happened ? The question is too large to answer in a Supplement. It is one form of the fundamental Christian question, on which all else turns. It is worth reminding ourselves, however, of these two things. It is, as we have seen, a clear-cut and decisive question, an ambiguous answer to which shows only that the question is not properly understood. And it is not a new question of a kind which only a modern critical self-consciousness enables us to raise. The question may present itself to-day in a different way, but fundamentally the human situation in which Christmas is claimed to have happened is the same now as ever it was. From Herod onwards men have challenged and resisted the fact that it has happened, and it has been in the face of such challenge and resistance that Christians have asserted it as a fact.

In so far as we are in a special position to-day to answer the question whether it has happened we should recognize that it is an unfavourable rather than a favourable one as compared with that of those who were present at the time, a fact which should prompt us to a certain humility in considering their testimony. It is true that we have learnt to be much more discriminating about any scientific facts which may be involved and much quicker to suspect any merely fanciful and legendary element in the story, but we are far less disciplined in apprehending spiritual reality and much more uncritical in our appraisal of it. When we wonder whether the testimony of the shepherds and the wise men or that of Herod and the Jews is more trustworthy, it is worth remembering that we are not wiser than the kings from the east nor more vigilant and single-eyed than the shepherds, but that we are no less moved by political

expediency than Herod and no less inclined to self-righteousness and religious complacency than the Jews.

This is a fact about ourselves which we must allow for even if we are convinced and practising Christians. We may acknowledge that Christmas has happened, that the testimony of the wise men and shepherds has been confirmed as true, and that nothing can ever be the same again : Christ has been born in our hearts by faith and the same miracle has happened in multitudes of our fellows around us, and we hold continuity of experience with an unbroken succession of men and women of every age and clime in whom it has also happened. And we may know, too, that because it has happened the Christian faith in its fulness must be true. The final victory of God is assured and all things are ours and we are Christ's and Christ is God's. But in the weakness of our own faith and surrounded by a world which, in its blindness, cannot see that he has come, or misunderstands the significance of his coming, we also may easily slip into ways of thought and action which imply that Christmas has not really happened.

LOSING OUR NERVE

If my own temptations and difficulties are any index of common experience in this matter, I think there is a real danger of the Church as well as the world losing its nerve because of an inadequate trust in the power of God. The Christian civilization of the West has decisively shattered the most murderous attempt ever yet made upon its life, and many of its leaders have not unimpressively re-affirmed its Christian basis. The time seems ripe for the boldest and most aggressive Christian action on our part. But we are so oppressed by the knowledge that the world is still a very sick world, that our victory has been won by alliance with an avowedly anti-Christian state and by methods which the Christian conscience must condemn, and that all our plans may be thwarted by the intractable human material and the immensely complicated and almost uncontrollable social forces with which we have to deal, that we find it hard to rise to the measure of our opportunity. It is right, of course, that we should not minimize our difficulties, especially in the presence of those who speak glibly at every crisis about "the Church's great opportunity." But I have an uneasy feeling that our dwelling on our difficulties is equally often an excuse for not facing up to the great tasks which confront us.

Further, the iron of the historical relativism of the time has entered into our souls. However bravely we may still sing of how "unharm'd upon the eternal rock the eternal city stands," we

cannot altogether shake off the disloyal suspicion that Christian civilization is played out and that in the atomic and post-atomic ages a new cosmology and with it a new religion, as different from Christianity as Christianity was from what went before it and seemingly as absolute, will emerge. A creeping paralysis spreads over our efforts, therefore, and we slip insensibly into the position of meekly following in the wake of events, the poor relations of secular civilization.

To us at this time, when we, with the world, are beginning to experience the peculiarly unpleasant hangover of the second world war, mixed up as it is with the nightmare of the atomic bomb, the simple elemental fact of the Christmas message comes with greater clarity and directness than ever. Christmas has happened. This is still the year of our Lord 1945, and we have no reason for changing our way of reckoning time. The Christian era has not passed away. The coming of God to earth in Jesus Christ is not one incident among many in the moving panorama of mortal existence. It is the real crisis behind the crises, the event on which all else turns. It is the New Dispensation under which all mankind now lives. We have no right, therefore, to lose our nerve. "Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, of sure foundation." Nothing built on the foundation of that stone will crash in ruins. "He that believeth," as the prophet goes on to say, "need not make haste," need not, that is to say, be in a hurry, becoming fussy and flustered and possibly losing his head. However unsettled the time, however weary and enervated men may feel, however heavily the relativities of history may press upon us, we can go forward to make our plans as Christians in the boldest and most courageous manner, confident that he who has come to us in humility as a babe is the One through whom all things hold together and that the whole universe exists as the theatre of his glory.

THE RE-BIRTH OF CHRISTENDOM

This means specifically for us in this first post-war Christmas an act of faith in our own Churches and in the secular society they have done so much to fashion and to safeguard. We sometimes talk almost lightheartedly and complacently about the possibility that Europe may finally depart from her Christian allegiance and that in the future the younger Churches of the east and south will be the great centres of Christian life and culture. It is true that we can look to great things to come from the younger Churches, but to think in those terms may mean a most dangerous evasion of our

own responsibilities and a covert form of secularism. A post-Christian England and a post-Christian Europe will not be merely interesting anachronisms, as though Christianity could come and go and leave the world fundamentally unaffected. As we have good cause enough to know from the experiences through which we have just passed, seven legions of devils rush in to claim its soul. And Europe and England are so placed to-day that their destruction would almost certainly leave the rest of the world in ruins. Besides, quite apart from the question of the fate of civilization in Europe, what right have we to suppose that old-established Churches must necessarily die and that they cannot find renewal at the place where they first found their life? Christmas has happened and God has not forsaken his Church in England or Europe or anywhere else. As we look out upon the world to-day we see much that seems to defy God's purpose for his world, but we also see much that confirms it and not least amid the ruins of the continent of Europe itself. I believe, under God, in the future of his Church in England and in Europe and in the future of those lands through the Church. I believe that if we use aright the machinery which is being slowly and carefully fashioned for the re-integration of the Church and the recapture of England and Europe for Christendom we shall be blessed by God and, in our own time, shall see the walls of a new Christendom arise.

THE CONDITIONS

Christendom can be reborn in the lands where it first had birth. But the lesson of this Christmas-tide to us, underlined and reinforced by all that has happened to us in Church and world in the days through which we have just passed, is that it can only happen on two conditions. First, it must be genuine re-birth. No new light and warmth can come to us if we merely rake over again the ashes of a tired world which has already burnt itself out. But "how can a man be born again when he is old?" we may be tempted to ask with Nicodemus, going on with the stupid literalness of the modern intellectual on the defensive to enquire, "can he enter into his mother's womb again and be born?" And the answer must be once more that "with men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Signs are not wanting already that the new birth of Christendom may be on its way. The theological quickening of recent years, the fresh perception by powerful Christian minds belonging to different traditions and schools of thought of the power of Christian faith to meet the real needs of men in the world to-day, and the new attention being given to the relation of the Church to society are facts from which we may legitimately take heart. It is for us to persevere in these ways and not lose

heart because the task is hard and the road is long. The world may seem to be in the grip of winter, but there are signs of a new spring-time of the Spirit in the Church.

The other condition is, however, no less important. This theological and institutional re-birth will only be genuine if it carries with it a new identification of ourselves with the poor and the oppressed and the baffled multitudes of this age, whose colossal burden of misery is the harvest of the failure of Christendom. If we are to find new life in Jesus Christ it can only be by entering into the fellowship of his sufferings and being one in that fellowship with all who suffer. Dr. Charles Singer, in his *The Christian Failure*, asserts that the Church has failed because it has been more interested in itself as an institution than in serving humanity. The charge as he makes it is unjust, but the fact that it is made is a solemn reminder to us that all our elaborate plans for the recreation of Christendom are vain if they do not carry with them a new relationship of self-giving with real people in their real needs. As we look out on the misery and need of Europe this Christmas-tide and remember how in defiance of Christmas' simple meaning we are making it an occasion for national self-indulgence, this is a side of the matter we shall not readily forget.

Christmas has happened. Because that is so we can look forward with hope and can offer renewal of strength to the tired and unhappy men of this age who are losing faith in themselves without gaining faith in God. Our cause is a winning cause and the universe itself is on our side. If we trust in God we shall not be confounded. "Strengthen ye the weak hands," therefore, "and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: Behold your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; he will come and save you."

Subscriptions—12s. 6d. (\$3.00 in U.S.A. and Canada) for one year. 6s. 6d. for six months (Great Britain and Ireland only). Single copies 6d.; reduction for quantities.

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All communications and subscriptions should be sent to—

THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, 20 BALCOMBE STREET, DORSET SQUARE, LONDON, N.W. 1.

Published by Dr. J. H. Oldham for the Christian Frontier Council, and printed in Great Britain by the Church Army Press, Cowley, Oxford.